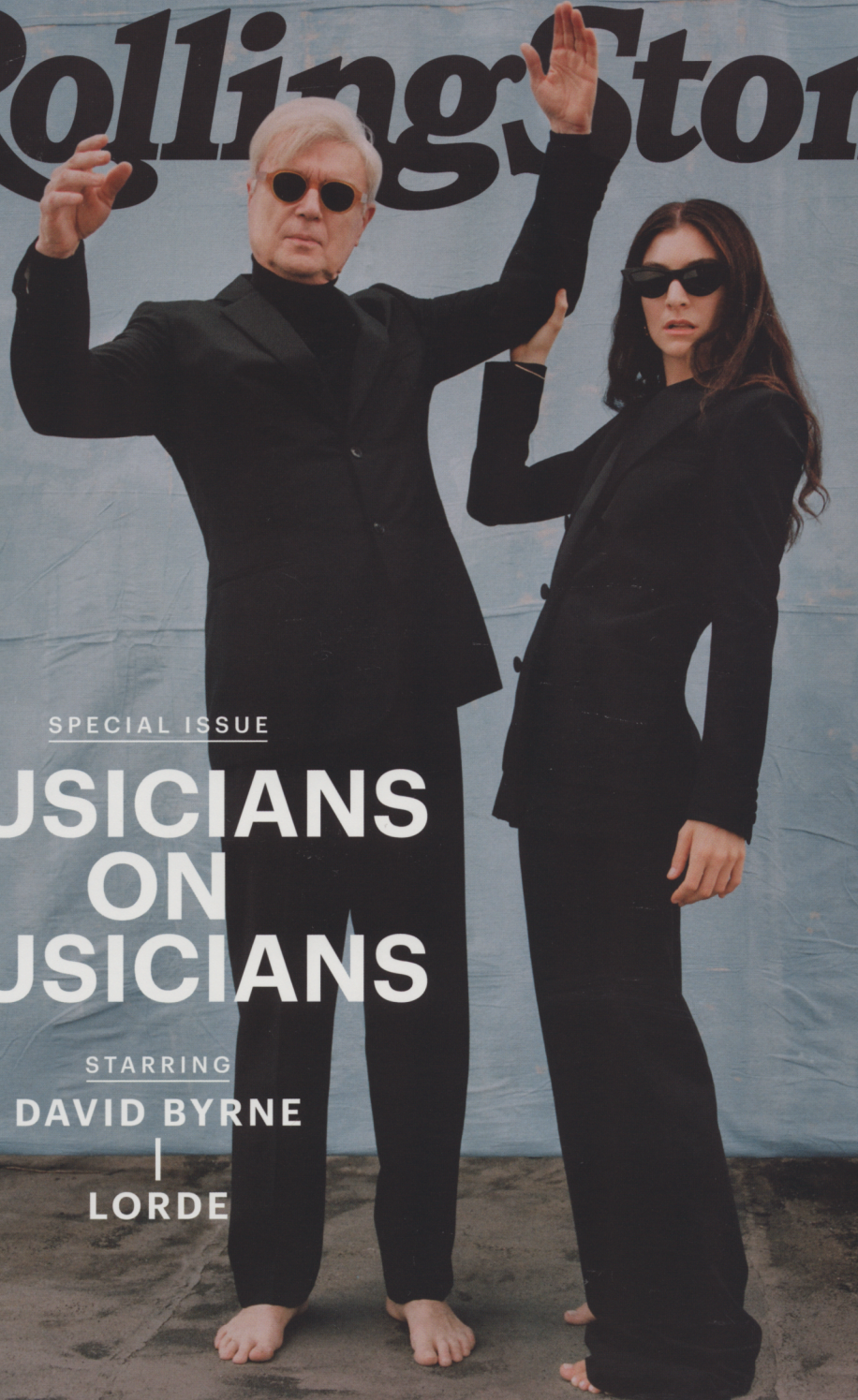


Rolling Stone

A full-page photograph of David Byrne and Lorde. David Byrne, on the left, is wearing a black turtleneck and a black suit jacket, with his arms raised in a gesture. Lorde, on the right, is wearing a black blazer and black pants, also with her arms raised. They are both wearing dark sunglasses and are barefoot. The background is a light blue, textured wall.

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MUSICIANS ON MUSICIANS

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|
LORDE

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LORDE | DAVID BYRNE

On fighting stage fright, the secret to writing a deep pop song, and life without social media

INTERVIEW BY **Simon Vozick-Levinson** PHOTOGRAPHS BY **Shaniqwa Jarvis**

IT TAKES ONLY a few minutes after they meet for Lorde and David Byrne to get in sync. The pop star, 24, and the elder statesman, 69, are on the rooftop of a photo studio in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, on a windy Sunday afternoon. Both are dressed in stylishly low-key all-black ensembles: Byrne is in a Hermès turtleneck, while Lorde is casually regal in a loose-fitting Saint Laurent suit. Neither is wearing shoes. They start off standing side by side with stoic expressions. Then Byrne begins swaying gently to the reggae music playing on a nearby boombox. Soon both are leaning back, striking poses, laughing, very nearly swag-surfing.

"This is my dream!" Lorde confides after they go downstairs for the interview. She's brought a phone full of questions that she wrote out for Byrne, whose music was a huge touchstone of her youth in New Zealand. The strikingly independent perspective that made her an out-of-nowhere phenomenon in 2013 with "Royals" is still going strong on *Solar Power* – the album she released this summer after a four-year break in which she traveled to Antarctica and got back in touch with the power of nature – and she's looking forward to getting to know one of her earliest musical heroes.

Byrne has been thinking about his past lately, too, for *American Utopia* – the hit show, based on his full catalog from Talking Heads onward, that returned to Broadway this fall after going dark during the pandemic (and becoming a Spike Lee joint in the meantime). He's equally excited to make Lorde's acquaintance: When he pedaled here from his Manhattan home on a sleek blue-gray e-bike (with matching

helmet), he brought a crumpled email printout and a legal pad with some scribbled notes of his own, which he carries around as he cheerfully introduces himself to everyone on set.

"I've thought about you a lot," she tells him as they sit down to talk. "I don't even know where to start, David. I just have so much to ask you." Byrne smiles courteously: "Ah, thank you." And they're off.

LORDE: Are you an introvert? Do you have to go and have a rest after a day like this, or are you charged up by it?

BYRNE: I'm not as introverted as I used to be.

LORDE: You can push through it?

BYRNE: Yeah. As you may have seen, I say hi to a lot of people. In fact, some of my friends say, "Could you just not say hi to everybody? They don't know you."

LORDE: No, it's great to say hi.

BYRNE: I love to have conversations with, say, the person at the checkout in the grocery store. If I can say something funny and make them laugh, then I've done a good thing today. But that said, some of the introversion stuff stays with me. I have no problem spending time alone. I'll have conversations with myself sometimes. And it's not crazy conversations – just kind of mundane things.

LORDE: Aloud?

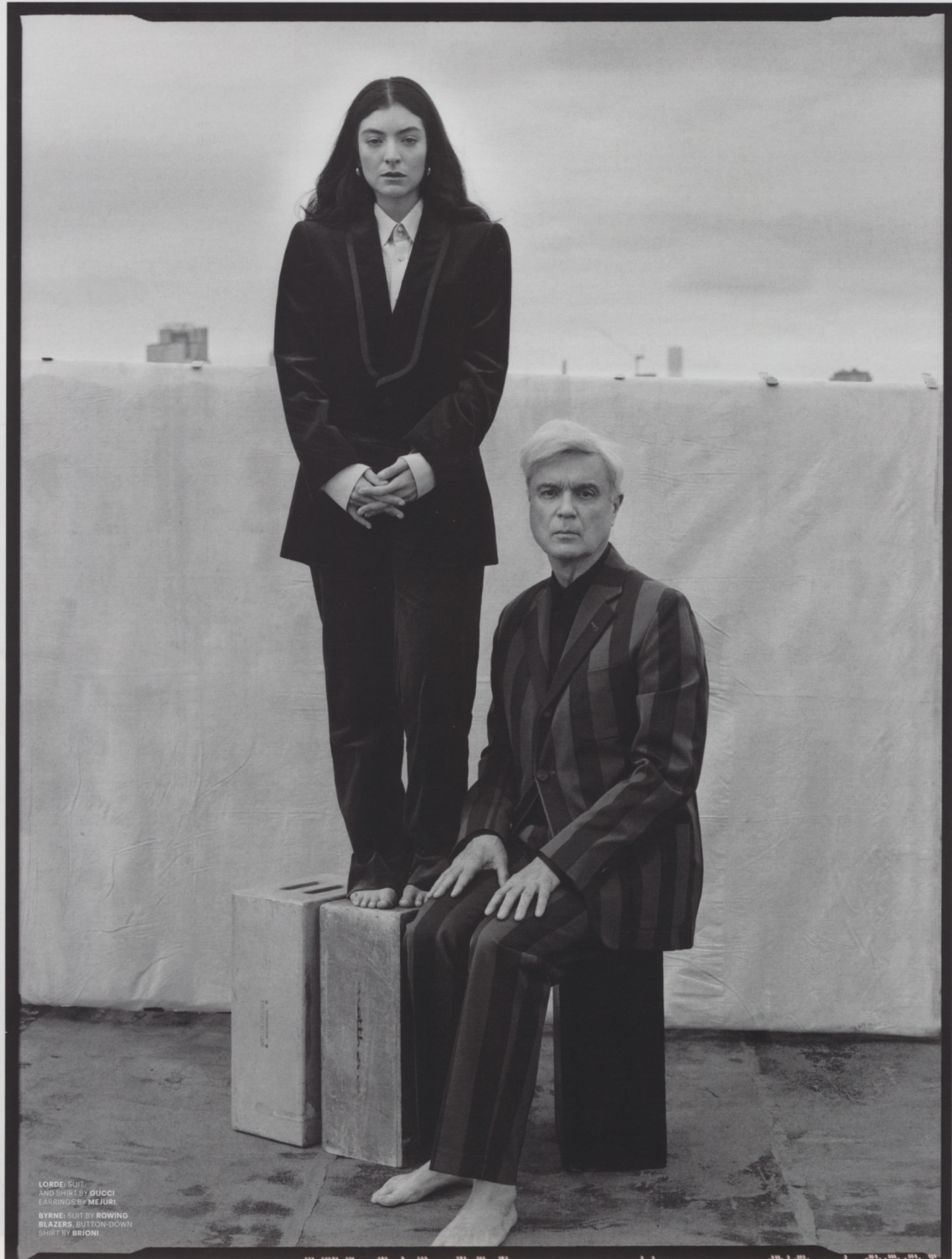
BYRNE: Sometimes. I'm happy working on my own, whether it's on a song or something else. I remember, this was before the pandemic, I would be happy sometimes going to a restaurant by myself and just reading by the counter.

LORDE: Me too. They like you more, the staff. They like people dining alone, I think because we're less irritating.

BYRNE: That could be.

LORDE: Here's something I want to know for my own personal enjoyment, to satisfy my curiosity. The first time I was made aware of your work was by my mother. It might have been a reaction to something that I was watching or listening to that was not so good, and she said, "I've got to show you something proper." And she pulled out a performance that you did of "Take Me to the River," and I had never seen anything like that in my life. As I watched it over and over – this is such a niche question, I apologize. But you didn't blink for a minute. Was that showmanship?

BYRNE: Oh yes, not human. No blinking. I think at that point, I must have been very nervous and terrified. I imagine my movements were proba-



LORDE: SUIT
AND SHIRT BY GUCCI
EARRINGS BY MEJURI
BYRNE: SUIT BY ROWING
BLAZERS BURTON-DOWN
SHIRT BY BRIONI



LORDE: JACKET AND
PANTS BY SAINT LAURENT.
EARRINGS BY MEJURI.

BYRNE: SUIT BY
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& WEATER BY BRIONI.
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LORDE: STYLED
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ably twitchy. But it was fine. That's me. There's nothing to be ashamed of, that's just what I do.

LORDE: Well, I was very taken by it. If that is showmanship, that's one of the coolest, craziest things.

BYRNE: I heard your music ages ago. One of the things that struck me was how minimal it was. There was a lot going on in the vocal area with harmonies, but musically, it was stripped down—just what you need as far as beats and keyboards, and no more. Which completely knocked me out. I thought, "I could learn from that."

LORDE: That's very nice of you. I feel I have gotten more maximal as I become a better producer.

BYRNE: Did you get any pushback in the beginning: "You need to add this, that, and the other to this production?"

LORDE: It's funny that you say that. When I released "Royals" on my SoundCloud, just for free, I quickly heard from an American record company, and they were like, "For the real version, you might need to put a bit more into it." "Oh, this is the real version!"

BYRNE: So you felt, right away, you had a sense of this is what it wants to be.

LORDE: Yeah. It's that Ira Glass quote that I've always liked, where he talks about being young: You have taste, but you don't have skill. So you make things and you know they are not right, but your taste is intact, and that will get you there eventually. I can't really play anything, I'm not a good musician, but I always had my ear.

BYRNE: I have a question for you. I'm jealous of songwriters that can put specific things in a song. On your new album, on "California," you mention the Laurel Canyon Country Store. I lived there in the mid-Eighties, so I know what that's like. That's where you would go for some groceries or pizza.

LORDE: Good pizza.

BYRNE: Yeah. It paints a whole picture. I try to do that, and it's very difficult for me. I tend to write in generalities.

LORDE: I guess that's true, actually, of your work. I use specificity a lot because I like treating my work like a little map that is just for me. I can put things that really only have meaning to me. It feels like a scrapbook.

BYRNE: Was that a song about saying goodbye to that place?

LORDE: Yeah. It just wasn't for me. It was my first stop after coming to America. I sort of got swallowed up a little bit.

BYRNE: I remember for myself, yes, there were times where I got swallowed up. But there were times, also, out there in Los Angeles, where you get up in the morning and you step outside. The sun is shining, you can have your coffee outside. And you go, "This is not bad."

LORDE: Time for a confession. I've willfully not seen *American Utopia*, because it's very important to me to see it in the flesh. But you combine songs from different records within the show in a way that works well. Is it easy for you to do?

BYRNE: I don't mind. I've learned the hard way that you do have to play some of the hits for the audience.

LORDE: Did you use to not play them?

BYRNE: Just one tour [in 1989]. I started working with a very large Latin band, and there were a few older songs that I could work in there, but a lot of them didn't fit that musical style, so I was doing 80 percent new stuff that the audience had never heard. That's something in our business that always puzzles me. It's not like a movie, where you're not expected to do that scene that you did: "The one before that we really liked. Can you just repeat that again?"

LORDE: True, that's a funny way of thinking about that.

BYRNE: But it's also true that music has a different thing. Music is repeatable that way and can move people again.

LORDE: I wanted to ask about the relationship between clarity and mystery in your work. I remember as a teenager, I was friends with lots of kids who would go on to art school, and they really liked what they liked and wanted me to like it. Sometimes I would try and not be able to push through the polyphonic intricacy. I realized later that that wasn't really my failing or anyone's failing. I would try so hard, and it would break my brain. But your work had that mystery I love and the clarity that I need. Do you lean toward one or the other?

BYRNE: I think I default to more ambiguous, abstract lyrics. I realized I love a song that's all questions, but I don't write too many of them.

LORDE: I love a question in a song.

BYRNE: I read something the other day, like, "Is this the real me? Or am I putting on a performance? And if I'm

"THERE WAS A TIME WHEN I THOUGHT THINGS HAD TO BE EDGY. I WAS MAYBE AFRAID THAT IF THINGS SOUNDED TOO PRETTY, THEN IT WAS SHALLOW."

DAVID BYRNE

putting on a performance, are you putting on a performance too? And what if you put on my performance and I put on your performance?" It was just a series of questions that went down a rabbit hole.

LORDE: That's cool. You're also so good with what I think of as a pop melody. Have you always been drawn to that, or is that something that's been easy to access as a songwriter?

BYRNE: I always liked it. I had no fear of pop melody or being accessible. I don't think in the beginning I was able to do it—

LORDE: I think you were.

BYRNE: Well, thank you. I listen to earlier things and I sound a bit desperate, trying to get across, which is a good thing too. I remember, probably like a lot of people, buying these songbooks from different artists, just kind of learning the songs. Sometimes things I didn't really care for that much, but I thought, "Let's see how this is done." Maybe learn to play this on a guitar, and sing

along, just for myself. And through that, I would learn, "Oh, look, you can go from this chord to that chord, and it has this kind of emotional lift to it right there. I should remember that."

LORDE: That's the second part of you, that says hello to people.

BYRNE: Yes. I've learned that there's nothing wrong with a song sounding beautiful. You can say something quite profound, something kind of radical, even, but the melody can sound quite beautiful and seductive on the surface. And then it sucks you into something where it might really change your way of thinking.

LORDE: So there was a time where you were not wanting things to sound beautiful?

BYRNE: Yes, there was a time when I thought things had to be edgy. I was maybe afraid that if things sounded too beautiful or pretty, then it was shallow. Like a greeting card. You can't be saying anything serious this way. But then I heard other songwriters saying something deep and important, and yet the song is really nice to listen to. I thought, "OK, it can be done."

LORDE: I think of beauty as a real tenet of your work, for sure.

BYRNE: Thank you. On "The Man With the Axe," you mention "hundreds of gowns." What's that about?

LORDE: Well, I'm one of four children, and I had a lot of things that my sister had worn—not a lot of my own things, not much pocket money. And then I was 16 and I got a credit card, and hello. In that song, the next thing that I say is "I have a throat that fills with panic every festival day," because I get really bad stage fright.

BYRNE: What do you do for stage fright?

LORDE: I don't have a good answer for that. It's a real problem that I'm trying to get on top of. I try to write something down. I tape little notes to the stage for myself, so I would go over and be able to read something that me from the past is trying to tell me from the future. But it's a real struggle.

BYRNE: When I was younger, I always felt socially uncomfortable. I would throw myself on a stage and do a speech of some sort, or I would perform something crazy and then retreat back into myself.

LORDE: But now?

BYRNE: There's a little bit, but not the same.

LORDE: You're not thinking "Maybe I can get out of that door and run down the street and get away from here"? Because that does come to me occasionally. "Maybe the car can just go

around the block for four hours and then I missed the show.”

BYRNE: No, I haven’t thought that in a while.

LORDE: It’s hard to know if the pandemic has made my stage fright worse or better, because I haven’t had the chance to test it out. I do think this album is a little bit more calm, and maybe that will help. Maybe the content will help me feel a bit more chilled out. Do you have any little things that you do before you perform, or any ways of snapping into that mode?

BYRNE: I don’t have much of a ritual, that kind of a thing. I keep myself busy. I make some ginger tea. I peel the ginger, slice it, put it into a thermos, put boiling water in with some lemon or whatever else, and that’ll keep me busy for a good 15, 20 minutes. Keep my mind a little bit away from what I’m about to do.

LORDE: I like that, that’s nice. I do a lot of puzzles on tour. I’m often applying a piece right when it’s time to go, which maybe doesn’t help the stage fright. That’s too much of a change of mood. I’m still looking for the puzzle at the first song.

BYRNE: During the pandemic, I started doing drawings, which might’ve been a kind of therapy. And a lot of cooking.

LORDE: That was another question I wanted to ask. Are you really into food? Or cooking?

BYRNE: I really enjoy cooking. I think it’s underappreciated as a creative art form.

LORDE: I completely agree.

BYRNE: Once you learn from recipes, let’s say, how to make something, you can start to improvise. You can learn to substitute one sour thing for another sour thing, and that changes it a little bit. It’s kind of like music in that way. You know that you need something here, but what is it? And then you get to offer it to friends, and say, “What do you think of this?” Maybe not so much during the pandemic, when I ended up with a lot of frozen leftovers.

LORDE: I cook a lot. I’m not a recipe cook – I just do whatever I’m going to do. I’ve made some good condiments.

BYRNE: You mean chutney and things like that?

LORDE: Yeah, like a chutney and jam and some sort of savory something.

BYRNE: That’s nice for your friends.

LORDE: OK, this is another question that might be, I don’t know, obvious. Is there anything that, looking back, you’ve gleaned, that you can impart? A bit of wisdom?

BYRNE: That’s a really tough one.

LORDE: There might not be an answer.

BYRNE: Sometimes I might think that I have some wisdom that I should impart to somebody else – “You need to know this,” or whatever – but I also feel, who are you to be telling other people? So I often pull back. Who are you to presume that you know better than someone else? Better that they discover it, by seeing what you’re doing for themselves, rather than you telling them.

LORDE: Here’s something I’m curious about. I think of you as someone who is really plugged into the greater culture, and all things social. I wanted to know if you enjoy this, or if you feel beholden to it?

BYRNE: I’m not on social media. I have a little office, and I said, “Just post my photos and we’ll leave it at that.” But I’m not checking things.

LORDE: I’m not, either.

BYRNE: When social media started to emerge, I thought, “I think I have enough to do, rather than feeding this.” I was more concerned about my workflow than concerned about what other effects it might have. What about you? Where do you get your information, then? Mainly from talking with friends?

LORDE: I actually find out about a lot of new things from newspapers on my phone. Almost more than I would from Twitter or something. I miss a lot, and that was something that I had to become OK with, because as a teenager and late adolescent, I had all the fingers on all the pulses about every little subgenre and undercurrent. Choosing to relinquish that was difficult.

BYRNE: I’m aware that there’s things that happen – protest marches and things like that – that I would hear about from a friend, and I would say “How’d you know about that?” “On social media.” That’s some of the stuff I’m missing.

LORDE: Yes, I had the same experience. It’s tricky.

BYRNE: I get up every morning and I have my grapefruit and my coffee, and I read at least two newspapers online. So, for that time, for that hour, I’m kind of a news junkie.

LORDE: I like the grapefruit. Do you have the little spoon with the pointy edge?

BYRNE: We’re getting very personal here. I just peel it with my hands. I take the skin off and rip it in half.

LORDE: Wow. That’s crazy, David. I’ve never peeled a grapefruit.

BYRNE: Not that hard to do.

LORDE: You heard it here first, people. ☺

CL | JHENÉ AIKO

On breaking free of other people’s expectations, finding inspiration in family, and the future of pop music

INTERVIEW BY **Kristine Kwak**
PHOTOGRAPH BY **Erik Carter**

“I REALLY WANT A lot more Asian pop stars,” says CL. The South Korean pop singer, 30, is already doing her part to meet that demand – as is the woman she’s talking to, Jhené Aiko, 33. Both artists started making music at a young age, and they’re both still reaching brand-new peaks in their careers. Though this is their first time meeting, they immediately find a bond, learning they share a sign (“When I found out you were a Pisces, I said, ‘Yes!’” Aiko exclaims) and an outlook on making music that doesn’t conform to any set genre or industry mold. As Aiko explains partway through their conversation, “There’s always another layer with us.”

A Los Angeles native whose background includes Japanese, European, and African American roots, Aiko got her start in the R&B world, and she’s since been nominated for Grammys in six different categories, including Album of the Year, for her 2020 album, *Chilombo*, a post-breakup exploration that suggests a modern update of classic quiet-storm balladry. CL began her career in the K-pop system, as part of the enormously popular group 2NE1, and continued that success after striking out as a solo artist; her 2016 song “Lifted,” which riffs on a classic Wu-Tang Clan track, made the charts in the U.S., and this fall she’s releasing her full-length debut, *Alpha*, which fuses pop, hip-hop, R&B, and EDM with a joyful sense of borderless self-discovery. “I have an album coming out independently,” CL notes. “I chose to do that, going outside the system.”

CL: I know we both started when we were pretty young. I would love to know, what keeps you going?

AIKO: I started when I was 13. So it’s been 20 years, and I had my daughter when I was 20. When I had her, that